Touch and Go

N.H.S. reorganization has been kicked around by politicians, civil servants, health professions, and assorted experts for some eight years. So the Opposition must have had its tongue in its cheek in recently urging the House of Commons “to postpone the coming into operation of the new service pending a full scale inquiry.” The Government duly defeated the critical motion by 285 to 266 votes, but its first part expressing “grave concern at the way in which the reorganization of the National Health Service is currently taking place,” will have been appreciated by health service staff.

During the debate M.P.s from all sides of the House had depressing tales about the personal uncertainties created by the changeover. Reorganizing an organization of 800,000 cannot be done without some pain, but it is reasonable to ask whether the difficulties are not becoming intolerable because of an unrealistic timetable. One particularly disquieting aspect of the debate was the report that experienced administrative staff were leaving the N.H.S. because of these uncertainties. These may be no more than isolated cases dug up for political purposes, but their drift is confirmed by a warning from the National Association of Local Government Officers* that local health authorities and administrators are “busily seeking and getting” alternative posts in local government.

All this suggests that the Health Service may be heading for a serious administrative crisis—and, indeed, N.A.L.G.O. is balloting its members on whether they should co-operate over reorganization. Support, moreover, comes from Hull University, whose research team has been studying the changes on Humberside from 1972 to 1975. Its second progress report2 shows the uncertainties staff have about their role after 1 April 1974. Despite the substantial investment in training staff for the changeover and the large flow of information from the Department of Health and local sources, the team says that much of this information was general and did not tell staff what they really wanted to know: what would happen to them as individuals. In view of the efforts being made to inform everybody one worrying revelation is the lack of basic knowledge about the changes amongst staff attending training courses—and they included all sections of the health services. Of 166 members asked to indicate which of a range of services would be outside the N.H.S. after 1 April 1974 “only nine gave a totally correct set of answers.” No fewer than 28 people, for instance, said that social service departments would be the responsibility of the N.H.S.

There are only three months to go to reorganization and many senior staff are still not appointed. Thus with day-to-day work now made more uncertain by the Government's emer-